

The Push for Governmental Efficiency Threatens National Forests

BY PETER STEINHART

There have always been people whose idea of administrative symmetry is violated by the federal Department of Agriculture's jurisdiction over the national forests. Using the philosophy of like things in like containers, they argue, the forests ought to be under the Department of the Interior, along with the nation's parks, water projects, wild animals, Indian reservations and other public lands—in a sort of "Department of the Unploughed and Unpaved."

In fact, since 1905, when the forests were removed from Interior's bailiwick and placed under the administration of the Forest Service, in the Department of Agriculture, Interior itself has sought to get them back. Almost every presidential administration considers making the transfer, and efforts have been mounted under Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson and Nixon.

Now, it's the Carter Administration's turn.

Carter proposes to move the Forest Service from Agriculture, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Ad-

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ministration from Commerce, into the Department of the Interior, and to rename Interior the Department of Natural Resources. The Forest Service would merge with the Bureau of Land Management—which has a smaller budget and fewer employees, but administers twice as much public land.

The Administration argues for the change on the grounds that it would increase efficiency, and save \$100 million and 2,000 jobs. It further contends that the merger would eliminate unnecessary conflicts between agencies. For example, it took two years and \$500,000 to decide whether the Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in Commerce, or Fish and Wildlife, in Interior, had jurisdiction over endangered sea turtles—and then it was decided that the Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration spoke for turtles in the water and Wildlife spoke for turtles ashore.

Also, different rules govern grazing permits and timber harvesting in adjacent national forest and Bureau of Land Management lands. And if a troublesome national park bear crosses the boundary into a national forest, park rangers are powerless to follow it. Uniting the resource agencies would require a single Cabinet secretary to resolve such conflicts.

Most of the controversy over the reorganization plan centers on the transfer of the Forest Service. Timber interests oppose the move. Says Gene Bergoffen of the Na-

tional Forest Products Assn., "I'm not sure we could ever get significant support for this proposal in our industry." He points out that most of the forests in Southern states are on private lands depending heavily upon private forestry programs more congenial to the Department of Agriculture than to the Department of the Interior, which has, according to Bergoffen, "historically been negative and regulatory toward private land." He adds that Midwestern states are likely to oppose any move that might diminish the budget and power of the Department of Agriculture, as removal of the Forest Service's 55,000 employees would certainly do. And Western timber interests have traditionally opposed moves to set aside forests for uses other than logging.

Above all, says Bergoffen, "We're concerned that they're going to put the Forest Service in a climate less concerned with renewable resources than with preservation. We've made it clear that actions are necessary to persuade the folks in the industry. We've made it very clear that positive action on RARE II would be necessary."

RARE II is acronymic shorthand for the second Roadless Area Review and Evaluation, an inventory by the Forest Service to determine which lands will be classified as wilderness and which will be left open to logging.

Bergoffen's requirement of "positive action" on RARE II thus immediately pits the timber industry against the environmentalists, a group the Carter Administration expected to endorse the reorganization proposal. It is even said that the transfer of the Forest Service first was suggested to Carter by Thomas Kimball, executive vice president of the National Wildlife Federation, which opposes many current logging practices. Kimball was said to have viewed the current secretary of the interior, Cecil Andrus, as a committed preservationist dedicated to making the Department into a balanced and considerate resource agency. At the same time, Kimball felt that Forest Service policies on timber cutting and the use of herbicides did not serve the interests of wildlife.

Baiting the Forest Service is a traditional pastime for environmentalists. For 20 years they fought the Forest Service's plan to build a ski resort at Mineral King, in Tulare County, and finally convinced Congress instead to add the unspoiled area to Sequoia National Park. Earlier, in similar battles, environmentalists wrested Olympic National Park and North Cascades National Park from an uncooperative Forest Service. They have seen the Forest Service squirm through dozens of congressional proceedings to set aside national forest lands as wilderness areas. At a hearing last year, a Sierra Club spokesman, John Amodio, told Forest Service officials, "Mount Shasta will either be protected by the Forest Service or it will be protected from

it." If the Forest Service didn't recommend a larger wilderness area for Mount Shasta, Amodio said, the Sierra Club would ask Congress to take it away from them and make it a national park.

The Carter Administration evidently expected these partisans to welcome the transfer of the Forest Service. And, in fact, when the plan was proposed in December, 1978, the National Wildlife Federation, the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club all supported it. Even when water-policy and planning agencies were cut from the original Department of Natural Resources proposal, they continued to support the plan.

But now that support has become despondency. Almost like a wife who discovers on the verge of divorce that she enjoys fighting with her spouse, the environmentalists are reconsidering. "We're reassessing our position right now," says William Turnage, executive director of the Wilderness Society. "Our position is getting luke-warmer all the time," says the Sierra Club's Brock Evans.

This fading enthusiasm derives first from a rumor that the Administration, desperate for support for the plan, has offered the timber industry vast incentives to support the transfer. It is rumored that the Administration has offered to increase the allowable harvest permitted in the national forests, to ease rules restricting the controversial practice of clear-cutting and to give timber interests a veto in the appointment of the executive secretary who would preside over the National Forests in the new Department of Natural Resources. Finally, it has been said that the Carter Administration offered to refrain from adding new unspoiled land to the Forest Service's already much-criticized list of proposed wilderness areas under RARE II.

Indeed, when Carter's wilderness proposal was revealed, it showed very few additions to the Forest Service's list. Environmentalists were outraged. "This is the worst land-use decision in American history," declared the Wilderness Society's Turnage. "They've opened up 36 million acres to development at one fell swoop."

The wilderness proposal ought to remind environmentalists that winning requires more than having your friends in the right office. Environmentalists refused to support, for example, a 1972 proposal for transfer of the Forest Service because they mistrusted Nixon's Interior Secretary, Rogers Morton. Yet many rushed to support Carter's proposal because they felt that Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus was a committed preservationist. What they are discovering is that the Department of the Interior is subject to political manipulation no matter who heads it.

Some old-line environmental warriors saw the threat from the beginning. David Brower, president of Friends of the Earth, said, "I feel uneasy about the proposal. One of

the most important things the public can do if it wants to have any strength is to play one department off against the other." He recalled that environmentalists were able to defeat Ramparts Dam, on the Yukon River, by siding with the Bureau of Reclamation—which didn't want the Army Corps of Engineers to build the dam—and then later they defeated a proposed dam in Grand Canyon by siding with the Corps of Engineers—which didn't want the Bureau of Reclamation to build it. Lumping functions together in a single department limits the environmentalists' options. Says Brower, "If the Forest Service were blanketed deep in the Department of the Interior, within 10 years they'd be logging the forests of the National Parks."

The irony of this discovery is that the timber interests have understood it all along. An aide to the House Agriculture Committee explains, "The Department of the Interior has a history of political appointments. The Forest Service has always been led by a professional. In a Department of Natural Resources, the chief of the Forest Service would be bypassed, and decisions would be made by a political appointee."

A Senate aide adds, "The Forest Service is a unique agency, something like the Marine Corps. They are unsullied by political rivalries. They handle \$1.2 billion in timber receipts and tens of millions of dollars in land transactions, and there has never been a scandal. But if this goes through, it will put the Forest Service into the agency that brought us the Teapot Dome scandal."

It seems odd that environmentalists didn't fear this all along. After all, what Brower is saying also was said in 1955 by the second Hoover Commission on government reorganization. Sixteen years earlier, the first Hoover Commission had recommended moving the Forest Service out of the Department of Agriculture and merging it with the Bureau of Land Management in the Department of the Interior. But in 1955, the second commission made no such recommendation, explaining that, "Competition between government agencies may prove as healthy in government as in private business. Monopoly can be as destructive through generation of complacency and political power."

A Senate subcommittee counsel adds: "There's a grand appeal for functional reorganization. We did it with the Department of Transportation and HUD (the Department of Health, Education and Welfare). And I think people in this town will tell you that they're signal failures."

In the end, the Department of Natural Resources plan seems doomed to a quiet death in Congress. There simply isn't support for it. Its passing should not go unnoticed, however, for it holds a lesson worth learning. And if we don't learn it, we'll probably see the proposal come around again and again and again.